

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

INFORMATION

SECRET/SENSITIVE/EYES ONLY

April 5, 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR: DR. KISSINGER  
FROM: W. R. SMYSE  
SUBJECT: Memoranda on the South Vietnamese Elections  
and on Hanoi's Intentions to Negotiate

Attached are three papers you asked for in San Clemente:

-- A paper by Negroponte reaffirming his belief that Thieu will win the election even if Ky runs (Tab A).

-- A paper by Edmundson stating that the effects of Lam Son will not hurt Thieu's chances, and elaborating on Thieu's Vice Presidential choices (Tab B).

-- A paper by myself analyzing Hanoi's current attitude on negotiations and the role of the 1972 elections (Tab C).

ON-FILE NSC RELEASE INSTRUCTIONS APPLY

SECRET/SENSITIVE/EYES ONLY

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

SECRET

April 5, 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR:

RICHARD SMYSER

FROM:

JOHN D. NEGROPONTE *JAN*

SUBJECT:

The 1971 Presidential Elections in  
South Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

In my memo to Dr. Kissinger of December 24 I estimated that President Thieu would probably beat General Minh by a majority of 60% country-wide. This prediction was based on the judgment that Thieu would lose I Corps, perhaps draw even in II Corps, and win decisively in III and IV Corps. It was further based on the opinion that Thieu would receive strong backing from the Army, the Civil Service, and Northern Catholics. His handle on the administrative apparatus would also enable him to stimulate a high voter turnout in remote areas where he is strong while letting voter turnout follow a more natural course in areas of weakness such as the cities.

Nothing has occurred in the intervening period which would alter my basic assessment that Thieu will win. There have, however, been developments which suggest that the earlier assumption that this would in all likelihood be a two-way race is now less certain. This, in turn, could affect the nature of the campaign and Thieu's victory.

THE ELECTION LAW

Late last year Thieu sponsored a Presidential election law, including a provision which would have required as a qualification for candidacy endorsement by at least 40 of the 197 members of the National Assembly or 100 of the nearly 600 elected province and city councilmen. This provision would have effectively limited the number of candidates to two, or perhaps three, because Thieu would have made a major effort to corral many more than the minimum endorsements required. The bill passed the Lower House by an overwhelming majority, but, when voting on the bill on March 19, the Senate deleted the above provision. The bill now goes back to the Lower House. State's assessment as of March 30 was that the Senate's version of the bill will probably be

SECRET

signed into law since the two-thirds Lower House majority required to override a Senate amendment is unlikely and Thieu will probably be very wary of vetoing or amending such politically sensitive legislation.

Thus for the moment we must assume that there will be no provision in the electoral law which would place a definite limit on the number of candidates. The only disincentive to a flood of candidacies (there were 11 in 1967) is a requirement in the present draft law which states that any candidate failing to win 20% of the vote must reimburse the GVN for his share of government-provided campaign expenses. In 1967, only ten percent of the vote was required.

### KY AND MINH

We have no definite reading of the intentions of either of these personalities. Ky is obviously posturing himself carefully for all eventualities. He could strike out on his own, he could do a bargain with Minh, he could ultimately do one with Thieu. As yet he has done nothing to foreclose any of these choices. What would be most consistent with his past behavior would be for Ky to make independent noises until very near the filing deadline and then in the name of national unity collaborate with Thieu. Ky is not a spoiler, but he is a brinksman.

Assuming, however, that Ky did run and Minh did as well, then Thieu's chances of winning by a clear-cut majority would be severely diminished. The problem, however, is one of calculating whether such a three-way race might result in Thieu's defeat. A judgment of this kind boils down to one's estimate of the extent and nature of Ky's voter support in a race where he wouldn't have the government apparatus behind him. My guess is that Ky's candidacy would cut into the voter support of both Thieu and Minh but without sufficient votes either to win himself or to affect Thieu's relative advantage over Minh. The reasoning behind this conclusion is as follows:

- If Ky ran, he would not be a government candidate and thus would not benefit from the material and psychological advantages of incumbency.
- The Army, as an institution, would oppose his candidacy and he could not count on its systematic help, although he might gain some individual votes.

SECRET

- Northerners and Catholics, while some are personally sympathetic to Ky, are more likely to let their vote be affected by considerations of stability and continuity.
- While past elections have shown that regionalism is less of a factor in Vietnamese voting behavior than many of us often think, Ky may be one of the few men on the Vietnamese political scene capable of rekindling regional antagonisms. He is an anathema to the Southern bourgeois, and I find it difficult to conceive him making any serious inroads into the now prosperous Delta, which is so key to the election results.
- Lastly, in order to be a plausible candidate, Ky will no doubt feel compelled to posture himself as an oppositionist. To the extent that he does, he will be competing for Minh's pool of votes rather than Thieu's. (In effect, one could argue that Ky's candidacy might hurt Minh more than Thieu.)

To the foregoing we must add that if the election law is passed as it now stands, there may be several minor candidates in the race in addition to Thieu, Ky, and Minh. These would probably draw even further votes away from Thieu's principal opponents. The greater the proliferation of candidates, the closer the situation will come to resemble 1967 when Thieu won with a 35% plurality (a figure which we can take as an irreducible minimum for an incumbent). The other 65% were split up amongst the remaining 10 slates.

One remaining possibility is that Ky would run but Minh would not. In such a contest, much would depend on Ky's ability to win over those who might otherwise have voted for Minh, such as the militant Buddhists. This unnatural alliance is conceivable, although it is doubtful Minh would ever openly endorse it. It is, in fact, hard to visualize Ky faring better in a two-way race against Thieu than would Minh. His biggest problem is that there is no single bloc of voters in the Vietnamese electorate which would naturally coalesce around his candidacy. He thus has less to build on than Minh; his balancing act will be much harder and I think he will leave himself exposed to disapproval from large segments of the electorate in whatever direction he strikes.

### THE OUTLOOK

At this moment, it looks as if there will be three major candidates and several minor ones. The Lower House could surprise us and

SECRET

override the Senate's amendment to the election law, in which case the prospect is for a field limited to 2 or 3 candidates.

In either case, Thieu will be building on the 35% mandate he won in 1967. He has the advantages of incumbency and 4 years of steady and demonstrable progress since he took office. As a principal achievement he can point to what the Vietnamese desired most when he took office -- increased and expanded territorial security. This accomplishment in itself could push the 35% figure over 50 through increased support in III and IV Corps alone. In any event, the nature and number of candidates opposed to Thieu can, in my opinion, only affect the size of his mandate -- and not his chances of winning.

SECRET

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

SECRET/SENSITIVE/EYES ONLY

April 5, 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR: THE RECORDS

FROM: MORRIS F. EDMUNDSON

SUBJECT: Lam Son 719 and the South Vietnamese  
Presidential Election

Now that the heavy fighting in Lam Son 719 has subsided, Vietnamese in various quarters have begun to speculate about the impact of ARVN losses on this year's presidential election. From what we have seen so far, the operation has not significantly eroded President Thieu's commanding position, and it is not likely to do so unless the Communists score some very impressive military victories between now and the election. The following points apply:

-- Public opinion in South Vietnam has not been aroused to any particularly harmful degree by the operation. Coverage of the operation by Saigon media was carefully controlled, and most of the more alarming U.S. press reports were not circulated in South Vietnam. (Recent Time and Newsweek editions, for example, were not distributed in Saigon.) The mobile ARVN units involved in the heavy fighting -- the Airborne, Rangers, and Marines -- are remaining in the operational area, and apparently will be rested and replenished before returning to MR III and Saigon. By then, many of the more emotional accounts of the fighting will have been tempered by the passage of time. There is likely to be more of a public opinion problem stemming from the losses incurred by the ARVN First Division, which is based in northern MR I and draws almost entirely upon the local population for recruits. This region, however, has never strongly supported President Thieu's government and it is doubtful that Thieu has lost political support there as a result of the operation.

-- ARVN reaction to the operation contains a fairly strong undercurrent of criticism, but most if it has not been directed at Thieu himself. First, there has been a good deal of carping by the three principal officers on the scene -- General Lam, the overall commander; General Khang, the Marine commander; and General Dong, the Airborne commander. All have

SECRET/SENSITIVE/EYES ONLY

SECRET/SENSITIVE/EYES ONLY

2

accused each other of various shortcomings, but at least to our knowledge have not criticized Thieu's ultimate role. Second, there has been some strong criticism of the U.S. for having pushed Thieu and the ARVN into the operation and then having failed to provide needed support at critical junctures. This rather xenophobic line, however, also credits Thieu with having called off the operation against American advice.

-- Thieu's potential presidential opponents, Minh and Ky, have not shown an inclination to press the issue. Minh has had nothing to say about it publicly, and it is not likely that he will. Ky criticized the operation in its early stages, and drew a strong negative reaction from within the ARVN. He attempted to counter this by visiting the scene of the operation, only to run into more hostility. Thus he discovered that attempting to gain support by criticizing the operation is a difficult and delicate game to play, especially by a military man. Ky may continue to offer criticism privately, but he is not likely to make a public issue out of it for fear of being misunderstood.

-- General Khang, who has been a rather detached critic of the operation and who is no friend or supporter of Thieu, recently commented that Thieu's popularity has suffered temporarily because of the losses. But he also doubted that this would last into the presidential campaign, or be a factor on October 3. We agree.

Potential Vice Presidential Candidates. On a slightly different aspect, there have been some recent reports that President Thieu is now leaning toward Prime Minister Khiem as his vice presidential running mate. This should not be considered at all definite yet, although Thieu is probably considering this possibility. In our view, Thieu will pick his running mate primarily on the basis of the actual competition he faces in the campaign. Should Minh run, Thieu would probably opt for a civilian Buddhist with southern support, such as former Prime Minister Tran Van Huong, in order to offset Minh's broad popularity. Should Ky -- a northern refugee with little popular support -- be Thieu's only challenger, Thieu would be concerned only with solidifying his military support and Khiem would be his logical choice. Thieu has previously expressed doubts that Minh will in fact run, and Thieu's current consideration of Khiem is another indication of this.

SECRET/SENSITIVE/EYES ONLY

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

INFORMATION

SECRET/SENSITIVE/EYES ONLY

April 5, 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR: DR. KISSINGER  
FROM: W. R. SMYER  
SUBJECT: Hanoi's Attitude Toward Negotiations, and  
the Role of the U.S. Elections

As you know, it has always been one of my articles of faith that the North Vietnamese do shift their negotiating position in time and under pressure. Therefore, I believe it is always worthwhile talking to them in order to sense their mood and to see the directions in which we should push, provided we do not give the impression that we are too anxious for an agreement.

Judging whether the North Vietnamese are ready to negotiate essentially involves two separate judgments:

-- First, whether they are ready to make major concessions such as agreeing to pull out their forces or agreeing to supervised free elections before a coalition is formed.

- In my judgment the North Vietnamese are not prepared to go this far in the foreseeable future. Either of those concessions would virtually be tantamount to giving up their drive against South Vietnam, which is something they are not now ready to do in a formal way. Even if they lack the physical ability to keep the war going at present levels, I think they would prefer to revert to a lower level of warfare and take their chances on the future rather than to sign an agreement which effectively renounces their claims.

- This means that they will not in the foreseeable future agree to our negotiating demands, even though those demands are generous by our standards. They may do so much later, but not now.

-- Second, whether they are ready to engage in probing negotiations in which they yield nothing fundamental but attempt to obtain their

SECRET/SENSITIVE/EYES ONLY



SECRET/SENSITIVE/EYES ONLY

2

demands at the lowest possible price. This is essentially what they did in 1968.

--This kind of negotiation is in the ball park if we are prepared to try it. However, the problem is that they will be incredibly tenacious and will attempt to work us down to the absolute minimum.

- Thus such negotiations may not be useful for us, unless we are prepared to move very slowly and with great tenacity.

### The U.S. Elections.

The North Vietnamese are trained by their dialectics and their experience to believe that all American Governments are alike and that changes in U.S. policies must be dictated by changing the objective realities on which those policies are based rather than by attempting to influence the American choice of leaders.

However, they have probably been told by the Russians and they have probably also learned from a careful reading of the American press that some U.S. Presidents are "better" than others.

In 1968, Hanoi was repeatedly told that Mr. Humphrey might be better from their viewpoint than Mr. Nixon. They obviously were influenced to some degree by that judgment, although it was not the principal factor in their decision to accept the "understanding."

In 1972, they will probably believe that a Democratic alternative might be better for them, and I expect they will be reluctant to negotiate an agreement with President Nixon on terms which will strengthen his hand in the elections and might weaken a candidate who might give them a better deal. In short, they have no reason to do President Nixon a favor in 1972 although they had some reasons to do President Johnson a favor in 1968.

It can be argued that they may see, despite the above, some advantage in negotiating with President Nixon. He will be in power for another twenty-one months, and he will be harder for them to deal with in the second term than in the first. This might prompt them to open talks with us on a serious basis once we get through our current domestic crisis in order at least to see what we will pay.

SECRET/SENSITIVE/EYES ONLY

SECRET/SENSITIVE/EYES ONLY

3

On the basis of this analysis, we can conclude that they will see little reason to negotiate with President Nixon an agreement which he can claim as a fully successful outcome of the conflict. But they may be prepared to test the water.

Current Situation.

Xuan Thuy's prolonged absence in Paris and his reported visit to Moscow this weekend may presage some move on Hanoi's part. It would not be a fundamental shift but perhaps some slight adjustment. It would almost certainly contain elements which would put us under great pressure, including perhaps a new withdrawal deadline and some shift in Hanoi's stand on POW's.

SECRET/SENSITIVE/EYES ONLY